

Stuart Davis

Whitney Museum of American Art



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Stuart Davis

*A Concentration of Works from the Permanent Collection
of the Whitney Museum of American Art*

*Patterson Sims
Associate Curator, Permanent Collection*

*A 50th Anniversary Exhibition
August 20–October 12, 1980*

Stuart Davis is one of a series of exhibitions celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Each exhibition concentrates on the work of one artist represented in depth in the Permanent Collection of the Museum. The series is sponsored by Champion International Corporation. The exhibitions were organized and the accompanying publications written by Patterson Sims, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection, with Ella Foshay, Curatorial Assistant.

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Cover:

Stuart Davis, **Place Padeloup**, 1928
Oil on canvas, 36¹/₄ x 28³/₄ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.170

Introduction

Stuart Davis (1894–1964) seems destined to have been an artist. He once remarked that he did not grow up so much at the knees of artists as at their feet. His father was a newspaper and magazine art director, his mother was a sculptor. Both parents had studied with Thomas Anshutz at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Davis spent his childhood in Philadelphia and in East Orange, New Jersey. In his native city he first encountered the artists William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan—all of whom, with the exception of Henri, were then working for his father as illustrators at the *Philadelphia Press*. These five painters were soon to be the nucleus of The Eight and their iconoclastic urban realism profoundly affected the adolescent artist.

In 1909 Davis left high school to study with Robert Henri at his newly opened school in New York City. In a field of few prodigies, Davis' artistic inclination, skill and accomplishment were affirmed swiftly. The next year he was included with his older friends in the pivotal 1910 Independents exhibition. Five watercolors were shown at the 1913 "International Exhibition of Modern Art" (the Armory Show); he was the second youngest participant in this vast survey of advanced American and European art. That same year he joined Glenn O. Coleman, Hendrick Glintenkamp, and John Sloan on the art staff of the important Socialist periodical *The Masses*, where Sloan served as art editor. In 1913 Davis' work in a MacDowell Club exhibition was first singled out by Henry McBride, the distinguished art critic of the *New York Sun*. Davis was included in his first commercial exhibition in 1915, at the Folcom Gallery in New York. Two years later he was given his earliest one-man show, at New York's Sheridan Square Gallery. In 1918 his second solo exhibition occurred, at Erastus Hamilton Field's prestigious Ardsley Gallery in Brooklyn, New York.

Davis' artistic career was thus well launched

before he was twenty-five. In the distinct, clipped prose which is often associated with this prodigiously verbal picture-maker, Davis wrote of these years that "it is not unusual for artists to dwell on the obstacles they have to overcome. . . . But I am deprived of this satisfaction because I have had none."¹

Along with his serious study with Robert Henri from 1909 to 1912, ragtime music and jazz were among the most decisive early influences on Davis. Music impelled many artists of the period to abstraction, for it unlocked possibilities inherent in a completely formal artistic approach. Jazz clubs in New York and Newark and their denizens provided the imagery of many of his early drawings and paintings.

The striking exuberance and inventive syncopation of this music provided a model for formal artistic innovation. Moving boldly beyond Henri's teachings and the literalness of Sloan's artistic approach, Davis broke with the realist tradition inculcated from his youth. His break can be dated from his visits to the Armory Show in February and March of 1913. He was drawn to a wide spectrum of modernist European art but felt most sympathetic to the work of Gauguin, Lautrec, Matisse, and van Gogh. From the modernists he redefined art's meaning and possibilities. Thereafter he started to paint more methodically and to generalize form and adopt non-imitative color. He perceived that art could be a carrier of intellectual ideas and raise issues outside of representation.

Conversely, Davis always abhorred the notion of non-objectivity in art. He denied art that was completely removed from life and the human condition. His association with *The Masses* as an illustrator in 1913 demonstrated his commitment to the improvement of the social order. But in 1916, Davis and several other artists, including Sloan, left the publication following a dispute over captions and content. The episode made a lasting impression. Davis continued to believe that art and

artists were vehicles for social change, but only if artists remained within the artistic community. Davis realized, as he would again later in his life, that his artistic growth suffered when his art became too involved with politics. His art reflected the events of life, but ceased to mirror its outward appearances.

From the time of the Armory Show, Davis had moved in stages toward modernity and abstraction. Like many young American artists he took French art, specifically Cubism, as a model. Though he acknowledged the contradiction implicit in a young American basing his ideas upon those of another culture, he was compelled by modernist innovations. As early as 1917, a brilliantly colorful, painterly Cubism entered his art, but through the mid-1920s he continued to be dependent on the inspiration of a particular site or clearly discernible still-life arrangements. In these years, New York, Havana, Gloucester, and New Mexico provided recognizable points of departure for his imagery. By the late teens, simultaneous activities and varied situations were viewed within the same composition. The original influence of Gauguin, Lautrec, Matisse and van Gogh was subordinated to a growing appreciation of the intellectual vigor of Cézanne and the spatial flattening and simplifications of post-Cubist works by Léger and Picasso.

Robert Rosenblum has analyzed the American absorption of Cubism as twofold.² Topographical facts informed the Cubist vision of Charles Demuth, John Marin, Charles Sheeler, and others. Davis, on the other hand, more delayed in his adoption of Cubist principles, founded his Cubist style on the manipulation of still-life elements. His use of still life gave him more in common with the parent figures of Cubism, and it made him more coldly intellectual in his approach to all subject matter.

In the early 1920s, a group of witty collages and compositions with *trompe-l'oeil* tobacco-related motifs register significant shifts in his Cubist-oriented sensibility. These developments culminate later in the decade in the 1927–28 paintings of the Eggbeater series. In this series Davis methodically worked his way

through still-life arrangements of a small set of disparate elements—dominated by the distinctive form of an eggbeater—to the pure structure and color that lay beyond their realistic shapes.

Significantly, a packing case containing the Eggbeater series accompanied Davis on his trip to Paris in 1928. With funds supplied by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, he departed for the citadel of modernism secure in the knowledge that, on his own, he had made a breakthrough to very original modernist forms. It was a meaningfully delayed trip; Davis was one of the very few American artists to make a genuine modernist contribution in the first twenty-five years of the century without having been abroad. In Paris he was deeply affected by the architecture, of which he produced numerous paintings and prints. Work he sent back to New York was included in two group exhibitions at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, which he had joined in 1927 and with which he was to remain for almost his entire career. Davis returned from his fifteen months abroad chastened by the experience; he no longer believed that an American artist had to live abroad, and he never felt the need to cross the Atlantic again.

Upon his return, Davis embarked unequivocally upon his merger of Cubism and the American Scene. This “colonial Cubism”—the title of a later work—characterized his mature achievement. For a few years after 1929, Davis was in close touch with Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and John Graham. In the company of this exhilarating trio of immigrant-Americans, Davis was forming a new understanding of composition and subject matter. Painted aspects of the American commercial and urban landscape were fused in Cubistic arrangements that used stylistic devices which included asymmetry, broken linear striping, thick, built-up paint surfaces and flat planes of geometricized and curvilinear shapes. When recognizable ingredients of the landscape dropped out of his art, words, numbers, and phrases, especially slang, became a cohesive force upon its interlocking, flattened planes of color.

This writing may be said to be the flag of an intellectual system that governed all his art. As has recently been impressively documented, each work was the summation of considerable thought, numerous preparatory sketches, and extensive verbal querying of the creative process.³ Frequently Davis reworked earlier compositions, building upon the skeleton of a previous painting or drawing a new statement of its possibilities and underlying form.

One perceptive writer has classified the 1930s as “that sad decade that was midwife to at least three decades of ideas.”⁴ In this period of general impoverishment, private patronage and collecting of contemporary American art were—except for the efforts of Mrs. Whitney, Duncan Phillips and a few others—practically non-existent. Like many American artists, Davis was desperately poor well into the 1940s. His economic survival was dependent upon one year of teaching, and institutional support. In 1932 he was commissioned, through Donald Deskey of the Rockefeller Center Art Advisory Committee, to make a mural for the men’s lounge at Radio City Music Hall. From December 1933 through 1939, Davis remained on the payroll of various government artists’ relief projects. This vital support was contingent upon definite financial need: to participate one had to stay poor. But there was a time limit on support, and his involvement terminated in 1939.

During much of the 1930s, Davis devoted himself to writing and to political activity within the art world. In 1936 he left the Downtown Gallery and dropped out of the commercial art world. He was a charter member of the Artists’ Union from its beginnings in 1933 until 1939, and edited its commanding publication, *Art Front*, for a year, beginning in January 1935. He was national secretary (1936–38) and then chairman (1938–40) of the American Artists’ Congress. Both of these leftist-oriented organizations kept him immersed in their “meetings, petitions, picket lines, arrests.”⁵ As he wrote in 1936, “the artist has not simply looked out the window; he has had to step into the street.”⁶

Davis’ chief artistic legacy of the 1930s was

murals, the most public manifestation of the WPA art program.⁷ Along with his 1932 Radio City Music Hall commission, he completed three WPA/FAP murals in 1938 and 1939 and one for the 1939 World’s Fair. His WPA/FAP murals were *Swing Landscape*, made for the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York, but never installed there, a mural for the New York City municipal radio station, WNYC, and *Waterfront Forms* for the Brooklyn College faculty room, a work which has been lost. The austere and enormous (45 x 140 feet) black-and-white *History of Communication*, produced for the Hall of Communications at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, was destroyed following the closing of the Fair.

After the loss of his job on the Federal Art Project in 1939, Davis’ financial situation was desperate. He had married the previous year, and he needed a more secure income. Unable to sell work, he thought of starting a class in composition, and hoped to publish a book on “Abstract Art in America Today.” Two years later he was still without a commercial dealer, owed six months back rent, and, though he was teaching two courses and lecturing at the New School for Social Research, he was dependent on the sale of a rug design for support.⁸ Yet even at this difficult time, there is in his correspondence a strong sense of his ultimate confidence, consummate independence, and great wit. In the fall of 1941, Davis rejoined the Downtown Gallery and interest in his work by certain collectors and museums began building—so much so that in 1945 the Museum of Modern Art gave him a retrospective.

In *Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory*, John R. Lane has posited the two most critical developments of the last twenty-five years of Davis’ art: the influence of Mondrian and the Gestalt theory. Both stressed a greater degree of abstraction, which is reflected in the increasing scale and simplicity of many of Davis’ later paintings. Yet neither the obsessive purity of Mondrian nor the structural wholeness of Gestalt could diminish the special energy, personal symbolism and heightened color which mark all of Davis’ art.

The events of the final decades of Davis' life tell the story of his growing fame. Numerous exhibitions, prizes and honors were granted to him. He taught at the New School for Social Research through 1950 and was a visiting instructor at Yale University the following year. In these last years, Davis withdrew from the art scene into a life of hard work in the studio and continued the private musings in his notebooks that unlock, in fuller richness, the meanings of his pictures. He produced art up until the night before his death. The eloquent "FIN" in the upper-left corner of his unfinished *Last Painting* is a final, poignant gesture of respect to the language of a culture whose Cubist art he understood well enough to command as his own. That painting, like all of his mature work, dissects what he has felt, what he has seen, and what has influenced him with an evolving abstraction and intellectual clarity unparalleled in his time.

Stuart Davis' connection with the Whitney Studio Club and Galleries and the Whitney Museum spans almost his entire career. A painting by Davis was first shown at Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's studio in December 1917, in a group exhibition of landscapes by young American painters. Two months later Davis was selected with about twenty others to participate at the newly opened Whitney Studio Club in an "Indigenous Art" show, in which each participant had three days to produce a painting on the spot.⁹ Davis was included in numerous Studio Club group exhibitions and had three solo exhibitions there (1921, 1926, 1929).

Beginning with the opening show of the Whitney Museum, in November 1931, Davis' work has been on almost constant view in the Museum. Included in over forty group exhibitions as well as twenty-seven of the Museum's Annual and Biennial Exhibitions, Davis became a symbol of the institution's commitment to abstract art, and he was asked to write the text for the catalogue of the Museum's pivotal 1935 survey of American abstract painting.

The Museum opened with twelve paintings,

drawings and prints by Davis in the collection. *Early American Landscape*, *Eggbeater*, *Number 2*, *Place Pasdeloup*, and *New Mexican Landscape* had all been acquired around the time of Davis' 1928–29 trip to Paris. Like the pair of ink still-life arrangements, *Study: Compote* and *Study: Roses*, at least three were gifts of the artist made in gratitude to Mrs. Whitney. *New England Street* and two other gouaches (since traded) were bought out of his 1929 exhibition at the Whitney Studio Galleries. The three prints of Paris, *Place des Vosges*, *Hôtel de France*, and *Rue de l'Echaudée* were purchased a few weeks later.

Ten years later, the Museum purchased *House and Street*, the culmination of an extended correspondence between Davis and the Museum. *Owh! in San Paō* was obtained from the artist through the Downtown Gallery out of the Museum's 1951 Painting Annual. *The Paris Bit*, which powerfully reaffirmed the significance of Mrs. Whitney's support of his trip to Paris, was bought by the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art shortly after it was finished in 1959. In 1969 Mr. and Mrs. Arthur G. Altschul donated *Barrel House*, *Newark*. The acquisition in 1977 of all five of his 1931 prints—*Composition*, *Theatre on the Beach*, *Sixth Avenue El*, *2 Figures and El* and *Barber Shop Chord*—highlighted the Museum's increased interest in printmaking.

Following three solo shows at the Whitney Studio Club and Galleries, Davis' work has been seen in two retrospectives at the Museum; in 1957, in a show organized by the Walker Art Center in collaboration with the Whitney Museum and two other institutions; and in 1965, in a memorial exhibition which traveled to three other museums. This "Concentration" is thus the sixth one-man show the Whitney Studio Club, Galleries and the Whitney Museum have given to Davis' art. With humble beginnings in his impromptu creation of a work of art at Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's studio in 1918, the Museum has, in keeping with the growing significance of Davis' achievement, intensified its alliance.



Stuart Davis in his studio, 1941 © Arnold Newman

Stuart Davis (1894–1964)

1894

Born December 7 in Philadelphia, first of two sons of Edward Wyatt Davis, art director of the *Philadelphia Press*, and Helen Foulke Davis, a sculptor.¹⁰

1901

Family moves to East Orange, New Jersey.

1909

Leaves East Orange High School and studies in the fall at Robert Henri's newly opened school in New York.

1910

First public showing of his art, "Exhibition of Independent Artists," New York.

1912

Leaves the Henri School and establishes Hoboken, New Jersey, studio, which he shares with Hendrick Glintenkamp.

1913

Represented by five watercolors in the "International Exhibition of Modern Art," the so-called Armory Show; none sell. Joins art staff of *The Masses* and makes covers and cartoons. Makes weekly full-page drawings for *Harper's Weekly*. Spends summer in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he meets Charles Demuth. Moves to New York; shares studio with Glintenkamp and Glenn O. Coleman.

1915

Spends summer with John Sloan in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he returns almost annually until 1934.

1916

Resigns from *The Masses*.

1917

Included in the "First Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists," New York. First solo exhibition, Sheridan Square Gallery, New York.

1918

Serves as a mapmaker for U.S. Army Intelligence. First trip outside United States: travels to Havana, Cuba, with Coleman. One-man show, Ardsley Gallery, Brooklyn.

1920–23

Contributes drawings to *The Dial*.

1923

Spends almost four months in New Mexico.

1925

First one-man exhibition at a museum, The Newark Museum, New Jersey.

1926

Included in "International Exhibition of Modern Art Arranged by the Société Anonyme for The Brooklyn Museum." Retrospective exhibition of paintings and watercolors, Whitney Studio Club, New York.

1927

Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery begins to represent him; first of his eleven solo exhibitions there. Begins the Eggbeater series.

1928–29

Travels to France and rents a studio in Paris. Marries his first wife, Bessie Chosak, there (she dies in 1932). They return to the United States in August 1929, and spend time in Gloucester before settling in Greenwich Village, New York. Solo show of watercolors, Whitney Studio Galleries, in November.

1931

One-man show, Crillon Galleries, Philadelphia.

1931–32

Teaches at the Art Students League of New York.

1932

Paints mural for men's lounge, Radio City Music Hall, New York (now owned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York). Participates in "Murals by American Painters and Photographers" at the Museum of Modern Art.

1933

Enrolls in Public Works of Art Project, which was incorporated in 1935 into the Works Progress Administration (WPA); works in WPA mural and graphics divisions until 1939.

1934

Joins Artists' Union, of which he is elected

president. Enrolled in Emergency Relief Bureau for artists.

1935

Editor of *Art Front*, publication of the Artists' Union, for one year. Included in "Abstract Painting in America," Whitney Museum of American Art, and writes exhibition catalogue's introduction.

1936

Becomes a charter member of American Artists' Congress, of which he is elected national secretary. Suspends affiliation with the Downtown Gallery.

1938

Paints WPA murals *Swing Landscape* (now on deposit at Indiana University) and *Waterfront Forms* (now lost). Elected national chairman, American Artists' Congress (resigns in 1940). Marries Roselle Springer.

1939

WPA mural for Studio B, WNYC Municipal Broadcasting Company, New York (on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Makes New York World's Fair *History of Communication* mural (destroyed).

1940

Teaches at the New School for Social Research, New York (continues until 1950).

1941

Rejoins the Downtown Gallery. In two-man show, with Marsden Hartley, at the Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio.

1945

Included in "Three Contemporary Americans," Arts Club of Chicago; "Four American Painters," Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; "Paintings by Six Contemporary Americans," William Rockhill Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Kansas City, Missouri. Retrospective exhibition, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. *Stuart Davis*, with autobiographical statement by Davis, published by American Artists Group.

1951

Visiting art instructor, Yale University. Wins

Ada S. Garrett Prize at the "60th Annual American Painting and Sculpture Exhibition," The Art Institute of Chicago. Included in first Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil, the first time his work is shown outside the United States.

1952

One-man show, American Pavilion, XXVI Biennale, Venice, Italy. Wins a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship. Birth of only child, George Earl Davis.

1955

Moves to larger studio and apartment on West Sixty-seventh Street, New York, where he produces a mural, *Allée*, for Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa.

1956

Elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

1957

Retrospective exhibition, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, which travels to three other museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art. Wins Brandeis University Fine Arts Award for Painting.

1958

Wins the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum International Award (and again in 1960).

1961

Completes mural, *Composition Concrete*, begun in 1957, for H. J. Heinz Research Center, Pittsburgh (now on deposit at the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh). Wins the Witkowsky Cash Prize, The Art Institute of Chicago.

1962

Awarded the Fine Arts Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects.

1964

Wins the Joseph E. Temple Gold Medal from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Medal and Prize from The Art Institute of Chicago. Dies June 24 in New York, of a heart attack.



Barrel House, Newark, 1913
 Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 37 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur G. Altschul
 69.114



Barrel House, Newark, 1913
 Ink on paper, 20 x 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches
 Whereabouts unknown

Barrel House, Newark

The first phase of Stuart Davis' artistic development can be assessed in *Barrel House, Newark*. The earliest work by the artist in the Permanent Collection, it is one of the most accomplished and ambitious of the paintings he made prior to the mid-teens, when major shifts occurred in his attitude toward color, narrative content and standard perspective. In this early painting, the lessons he learned on visits to the Armory Show in 1913 have yet to be assimilated. In these first years of his career, he was particularly drawn to working in the convenient, quick, and inexpensive media of ink or watercolor. If possible, he painted on the site. His subjects were direct, honest and often slightly salacious. From 1909 to 1912 his study with Robert Henri and close association with John Sloan, both outgrowths of his parents' professional lives, mandated the appeal of the unpretitified urban scene. At the Henri School, students were urged to be "sketch hunter[s] . . . drifting out among people, in and out of the city."¹¹ Davis recalled of this period the "enthusiasm for running around and drawing things in the raw."¹²

Davis and his friends "were particularly hep to the jive and spent much time listening to the Negro piano players in Newark dives. . . . These saloons catered to the poorest Negroes. . . . The big point with us was that in all of these you could hear the blues, or tin-pan alley tune turned into real music for the cost of a five cent beer."¹³ One writer has conjectured that "before 1913," aside from the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, "the only real modern art in America" was ragtime, with its "incalculable energy of the rhythms, their complex interweaving into a headlong horizontal flow, and the inescapable modernity of their asymmetric offset accenting."¹⁴

The music may have been stirring, but the drummer and suspended piano player of the Four Leaf Clover band seem to have brought little happiness or luck to Barrel House's habitués.¹⁵ *Barrel House, Newark* and the ink drawing to which it relates evoke a curious joylessness, cynicism and fatigue. The shuffle of the oddly coupled dancing pair and the gesture of the man who is approaching them are the only real action in this oppressive space. Each person looks off in a separate trajectory of vision. On heavily outlined ovals, their features are suggested by dabs of paint smeared on flesh. They wear masks of passive despair for faces. Only the man at the extreme right is seen with sufficient detail to indicate individuality.

By the time he was twenty, Davis' art already negated literal depiction of a person or a scene. While supporting himself as an illustrator, in his art Davis was moving away from illustration. The art of van Gogh along with the demimonde subjects of Lautrec, both especially admired by Davis at the Armory Show, seem to have had the greatest impact on him as he moved toward a vision of his own. Scenes of the city were soon joined by landscapes of Provincetown and Gloucester, where color could play a more decisive role. Yet already in *Barrel House, Newark*, startling touches of color—blue, green and orange—have found their way into the scene. Story-telling incident is contained within a strong diagonal perspective and the radiating circle of luminosity at the top of the picture. In *Barrel House, Newark* Davis is still a conservative and very young painter, yet he has already put a great distance between himself and the realist aesthetic of the artists of The Eight from which he had sprung.



New Mexican Landscape, 1923
 Oil on canvas, 22 x 32 inches
 Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.174



Mexican Girls, 1923
 Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 1/8 inches
 Collection of Mrs. Stuart Davis
 Photograph courtesy of Grace
 Borgenicht Gallery, Inc.

New Mexican Landscape

Stuart Davis' views of New Mexico are among his last recognizable and non-fractured landscapes. The Southwest scenery was so arresting that it stalled and confounded his progress toward abstraction and modernity. As he confessed, "The place itself was so interesting I don't think you could do much work except in a literal way . . . [its] forms [were] made to order, to imitate."¹⁶

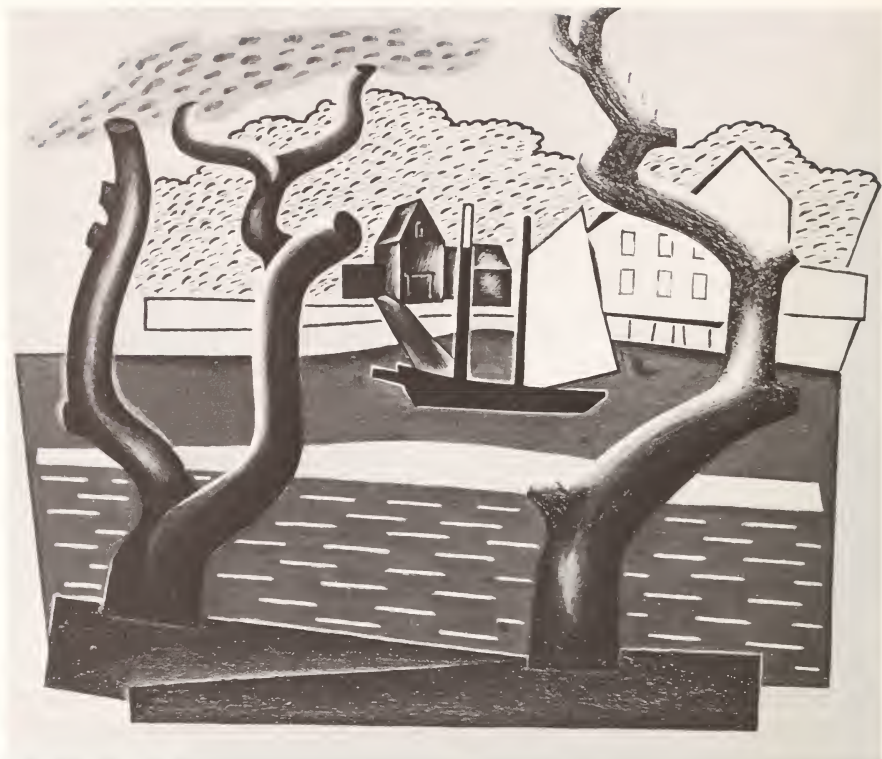
Though seeing things in a new way, rather than literal copying, was what engaged Davis, his New Mexican experience followed a period of the most radical experimentation in his artistic career. During 1920–22 he had experimented with a series of almost Dadaist, witty collages and flayed, specimen-like depictions of tobacco packaging. The four months that he spent in New Mexico in the summer and fall of 1923 at the invitation of John Sloan were a period of stasis after the bravado of these radical advances. Davis was part of a second wave of New York artists drawn to New Mexico. Many of these Easterners, like Davis, had done little traveling and the state's open vistas, exotic vegetation and technicolor hues provided them with an exciting new source of inspiration.

Both intellectually and intuitively, Davis was coming to have a very different understanding of the appearance of things. New Mexico departed completely from his concept of landscape. It was also the seat of a genuinely venerable tradition, an alternative, historic Indian culture, which had only become American eleven years earlier with the state's admission to the Union. If in *Mexican Girls* Davis' Indians were seen through the lenses of Léger, at least Davis insisted upon authentic subject matter, the miracle of fertility and a

summer rainstorm. The Cubistic flattening and Pointillist dots in *Mexican Girls* were, for an American artist, advanced artistic techniques grafted to timeless themes. Yet in their crude and tentative application; Davis seems to be using a contrived aesthetic primitiveness to describe a "primitive" (or less developed) culture.

The still lifes and simplified Cubistic works like *Mexican Girls* he made in New Mexico seem far less successful than the several landscapes he produced there. The landscapes present the state's vast terrain punctuated with adobe houses or other small man-made landmarks. In one painting, Davis and Sloan are seen motoring in an open roadster past a cowboy on a horse: it is one of the last narrative and directly comic touches to be found within his art.

The interlocking planes of color associated with Davis' mature art make an early appearance in *New Mexican Landscape*. Between the pink foreground and the blue sky, the painting is segmented into sections of yellow, green, gray and orange. And only in the gray mountain range at the left are the forms modeled. All other sections are composed of solid colors broken with linear divisions or dots of vegetation. Davis' insistence upon the picture's flatness is emphasized by its three-part border: a lasso-like white band, outlined by tan and brown, ropes in the scene. The clouds display a thickened version of the calligraphy with which they will later be signified. Ultimately, Davis was disappointed by New Mexico; he felt it was too "dominating." He considered it "a place for an ethnologist, not an artist," and never went West again.¹⁷



Early American Landscape, 1925

Oil on canvas, 19 x 22 inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.171



Fernand Léger

Study for *Repose*, 1921

Pencil on paper, 10⁵/₈ x 15 inches

The Museum of Modern Art, New York;

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Saidenberg

Early American Landscape

In addition to encouraging Davis to come to New Mexico in 1923, John Sloan had earlier introduced him to Gloucester, Massachusetts. From 1915 to 1934 Davis routinely visited this small, picturesque New England fishing port and summer resort near Boston. It and the surrounding towns became, after the mid-1920s, the subject of a number of paintings and drawings similar to *Early American Landscape*. Davis had immediately realized that Gloucester “was the place I had been looking for. It had the brilliant light of Provincetown, but with the important additions of topographical severity and the architectural beauties of the Gloucester schooner, a very necessary element in coherent thinking about art. I do not refer to its own beauty of form, but to the fact that its masts define the often empty sky expanse. They function as a color-space coordinate between earth and sky. They make it possible for the novice landscape painter to evade the dangers of taking off into the void as soon as his eye hits the horizon. From the masts of schooners the artist eventually learns to invent his own coordinates when for some unavoidable reason, they are not present.”¹⁸

Having made in the first several years of his visits richly colorful and painterly landscapes, Davis in all his later Gloucester paintings manipulated a flattened set of seaside elements: trees, boats, buildings and sky. His objectives—beyond capturing architectonically the charm of the New England coastline—may be found in an article he wrote in

1923 about his friend Glenn O. Coleman’s cityscapes. He described their effectiveness in terms more appropriate to his own art than to Coleman’s: “90 per cent of the ordinary features of the scene are left out, and yet when you look at the picture a mood is created that makes you feel that the place is one with which you are very familiar. This power is the result of instinctive selection of the essentials that make up the character of the scene.”¹⁹

Davis dealt with the landscape as if it were a still life. In *Early American Landscape* the twin trees, like all the other ingredients in the painting, are denuded to a symbolic configuration. They are placed on wedges of earth that convert them into sculptures on bases. Davis has taken special care to suggest the trees’ three-dimensionality, thus reinforcing the flatness of the remaining elements. The sea, the island, the schooner, the buildings, the massed vegetation and the clouds are discrete and insistently frontal entities positioned on progressively receding planes. Only the dock juts out into space. More severe precedents for Davis’ composition exist in the work and writings of the Purists, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, and most demonstrably in a drawing like that for *Repose* by Fernand Léger. Davis’ work evolves in degrees; *Early American Landscape* hovers between the recognizability of *New Mexican Landscape* and the abstraction of *Eggbeater, Number 2*.



Eggbeater, Number 2, 1927
Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 36 inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.169



Eggbeater, Number 5, 1930
Oil on canvas, 50 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 32 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

Eggbeater, Number 2

Davis once noted that everything he had done after his Eggbeater series was based on its ideas. With their memorably preposterous title, the first four Eggbeater paintings are among the best-known and most important of Davis' works. They are pivotal because in them he allowed himself a degree of abstraction that was virtually unprecedented in his art and was not repeated for almost two decades. These works had their direct genesis in 1927, when Davis nailed an eggbeater, an electric fan and a rubber glove to a table in his studio. Until his departure for Paris in May 1928, these three banal elements were his exclusive subject matter—with the greatest emphasis upon the eggbeater. The set of four oil paintings, a numbered quartet that came to be known as the Eggbeater series, was based on slightly over half-scale tempera versions, identically scaled pencil studies for the tempera versions, and numerous preparatory gouache studies. None of these works bore the slightest resemblance to the still life Davis had set up; their numbering was arbitrarily assigned thirty years later by Davis with the help of his dealer, Edith Halpert, and Rudi Blesh.

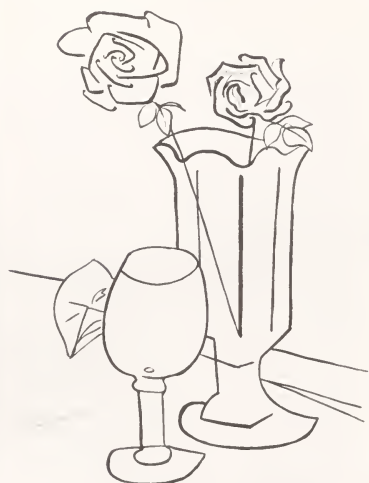
John R. Lane believes that the impetus for this series was Man Ray's *Man* (or *L'Homme*), a 1918 black-and-white photograph of a hanging eggbeater casting pronounced shadows on a wall. This image documented Ray's earliest "ready-made" (a commonplace object designated by the artist as a work of art), and is considered his first Dadaist photo. In *Eggbeater*, 1923, Davis' only prior picture to contain this implement, it was painted upside down. Davis waited four years to replace the eggbeater's naturalistic forms with geometric equivalents. "What led to it," as he recalled in 1945, "was probably my working on a single still life for a year, not wandering about the streets. Gradually through this concentration I focused on the logical elements. They became the foremost interest and the immediate and accidental aspects of the still life took second place."²⁰

Eggbeater, Number 2 differs from the other three 1927–28 Eggbeater works in several respects. The massed, compressed shapes never touch the painting's edges. A table is suggested by the bottom half of the work's two-toned ground. Without strong contrasts, its palette is the most subdued. Unlike the more richly impastoed surface of the other three Eggbeater works, the Whitney Museum's painting is smooth and its even paint application is closer to the flat paint quality found in the works of the last twenty years of Davis' art. *Eggbeater, Number 2* is the least spatially complex of these four works and contains the fewest linear elements. The lines in the other Eggbeater pictures introduce illusions of spatial depth, and lacking them, *Eggbeater, Number 2* is the most spare and uncompromising statement of the series.

Davis summarized the achievement which culminated in his Eggbeater series as a tripartite progression. First, he had assumed control over subject matter by abandoning painting at the scene, and composing his works from different drawings and perspectives. Second, avoiding imitation of naturalistic hues, he began to invent his own color for otherwise realistic pictures. Finally, he freed himself from the need to paint recognizable elements and started to perceive shapes and structures in pure geometry. The careful conclusion of a thoughtful struggle, the Eggbeater paintings were all the more remarkable for their adherence to advanced artistic ideas amidst the general retreat from abstraction in the late 1920s. Davis' achievement assumed added meaning in 1930 with his inclusion of *Eggbeater, Number 5* in the series. This late arrival indicates Davis' incessantly critical approach. He had gone so far forward with the first four Eggbeater paintings that, in his last use of this distinctive implement, he seems to have stepped back to review what he had discarded.



Study: Compote, 1928
Ink on paper, $24\frac{1}{4} \times 18\frac{3}{8}$ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.519



Study: Roses, 1928
Ink on paper, $24\frac{1}{4} \times 18\frac{3}{8}$ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney
31.519a

Study: Compote & Study: Roses

Though it seems at first glance as if these two sheets are the product of Davis' Parisian period—they look like magnified variations of the still life on the café table in front of La Cressonée in *Place Padeloup*—they were in fact made prior to his departure in May 1928 for Europe. The studies are earlier brisk exercises in the realization of form and mass by means of outline. They are based upon the objects that Davis had set aside for such a purpose in his New York studio. Indeed the same round-edged vase in *Study: Roses* and the glass compote in *Study: Compote* are seen in *Still Life—Three Objects* of 1925. These 1928 drawings are uncharacteristically large in relation to their modest intentions, and contrast sharply with the serious research of Davis' abstracted still lifes of the preceding months. *Study: Compote* was illustrated in 1935 on the cover of the Whitney Museum's exhibition catalogue *Abstract Painting in America*, for which Davis wrote the introduction, and indicates the breadth of that show's aesthetic scope.



Still Life—Three Objects, 1925
Oil on canvas, $26 \times 33\frac{3}{4}$ inches
Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford,
Connecticut

Parisian Prints & Place Padeloup

“Q.—Now tell me, Mr. Davis, is there any one outstanding event in your artistic life that has special significance for you?

A.—Yes. My trip to Europe in 1928”

—Stuart Davis, “Self-Interview,” 1931.²¹

Having just finished what he considered the most significant works of his career to date—the abstracted still-life paintings of the Eggbeater series, *Percolator* and *Matches*—Davis, upon receiving funds from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, sailed for Europe in May 1928. Davis told two versions of the funding for this, his first and last journey abroad. In the first, several (later two) paintings were purchased in 1928 by Juliana Force for Mrs. Whitney, and he decided to use the money to go to Europe. In the other, Mrs. Force “got the idea that I ought to see Paris, so she gave me \$900” and “a little more money” later to cover the costs of his fifteen-month stay.²² He had traveled outside the United States only once

before, when, in 1918, recovering from a severe case of the then-epidemic Spanish influenza, he visited Cuba with his friend Glenn O. Coleman. In Paris he sublet the cramped studio-apartment at 50, rue Vercingetorix, of a close colleague, the Czech-American artist Jan Matulka. Though upon arrival Davis spoke no French, he thereafter incorporated words from this language into his art with the same gusto as his mother tongue.

Following his intense and monastic concentration upon the Eggbeater motif, the carefree exploration of the streets and buildings of Paris was a source of relaxation and artistic inspiration. In Paris, walking about the streets and sitting in the cafés, he felt extraordinarily comfortable. In the late 1920s the city was the crossroads of the world’s artistic and pleasure-seeking community, and Davis remembered reencountering almost everyone he had ever known.



Rue de l'Echaudée, 1929

Lithograph, 9 1/16 x 14 inches

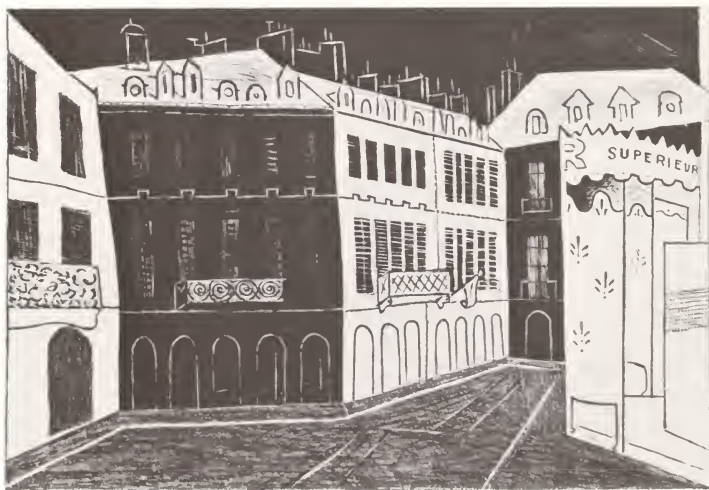
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.707



Hôtel de France, 1929
Lithograph, 13⁷/₈ x 10⁷/₈ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.705

Two and possibly more of the Eggbeater paintings accompanied him to Paris, possibly the smaller-scaled tempera versions, which were more easily transportable. Upon his arrival, a minor skirmish with French customs about these mysterious creations had been resolved by the invocation of the word “Cubism.” These paintings provide a point of reference against which the swift succession of Davis’ Parisian works may be judged. During his fifteen months abroad, Davis made twelve lithographs of the Parisian scene and at least as many major paintings to which they relate. The most distinguishing characteristic of the paintings is their insouciance and delightful evocation of a tranquil and idyllic city of architectural elegance within muscular robustness. The calculation and gravity of the abstracted still lifes is discarded for an infinitely lighter touch. Direct representation and incidental details are abundantly visible. A scenery of arabesque grillwork, calligraphic skies, and rectangles for windows is applied upon the obliquely planed geometry of line-sliced, color-banded facades.

In Paris, he learned for the first time of the existence of commercial lithography studios,



Place des Vosges, 1928
Lithograph, 9¹/₁₆ x 13³/₁₆ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.706

which would print anything that was brought to them. The period brought forth his most sustained involvement with the lithographic medium. Within their architectonic and documentary reference, the energy of Davis' lithographs of Paris is channeled into a variety of graphic notations and tonal values. He dealt with lithographic plates as if they were sketch pads to readily capture and experiment with the junctions of streets and landmarks that arrested his vision. His speed of execution was such that in *Rue de L'Echaudée*, for instance, one of the three Paris prints owned by the Museum, Davis reversed the letter N in two of the words. Words in these Parisian works not only convey information but form tight, united clusters of lines and plotted points of reference. All of the prints correspond to particular paintings; for *Place Pasdeloup*, there are two lithographic versions each of two of the paintings.

In contrast to the black-and-white lithographs, in his paintings of Paris Davis indulged in the most diverse and imaginative of palettes. Across the surface of *Place Pasdeloup*, fantastic, bright blocks and bands of color, including the tricolor of France and the United States, are arranged like banners. This painting is resolutely bordered in pink. Thin line-work breaks through the painterly crust of *Place Pasdeloup*, cutting geometry into architecture. Place Pasdeloup is a quiet square on the Right Bank in the 11th arrondissement. Though the square is noted for a sculpture by Formigé, its restaurant La Cressonee is the aspect accentuated by Davis. At La Cressonee (an obsolete term for a special watercress salad) one might also partake of "huitres et escargots" (oysters and snails). In the distance, "vins et charbons" are announced; this sign advertises those uniquely French shops that sell both wine and charcoal, an odd but logical combination, as they both warm one up. *Place Pasdeloup* is among the most lighthearted of Davis' Parisian paintings and bears cheerful witness to his statement that Paris at this time "was the best place in the world for an artist to live and work."²³



Place Pasdeloup, 1928
Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 28 3/4 inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.170
(on cover in color)



Drawing for *Place Pasdeloup*, 1928
Pencil on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/2 inches
Associated American Artists, Inc., New York

The 1931 Lithographs

In 1931 Davis made his most original contribution as a printmaker. The imagery of four of his five 1931 lithographs is complex and packed, a result of his European trip, from which he returned determined to join aspects of the American Scene with the pictorial construction of collage. As in the paintings he made in the early 1930s, Davis juxtaposed images and reveled in the challenge of balancing their diverse elements. When he first returned, he combined potent memories of Paris, realities of Manhattan and shapes of Gloucester. By 1931, his subjects, while maintaining diversity, had been focused upon individual locales.

Two of Davis' 1931 prints are limited to the New York cityscape. Filled with discontinuity and antic wit, *Sixth Avenue El* and *2 Figures and El* read as a kind of supermarket of Surrealism. Elements may be identified but their total meaning remains unclear; a tailor shop, the Hebrew word "Kosher," a vending machine, the tower of the Jefferson Market Police Court, a barber pole and a pleated curtain parade across *Sixth Avenue El*,

creating not a rebus, but a compilation. In *2 Figures and El*, a Léger-like figure stands at the left of the elevated platform, while at the right, a Picassoan collection of body parts waits. A smaller version of the vending machine is visible. The "8" may represent infinity or the Eighth Street subway stop in Greenwich Village. After Paris, Davis was overwhelmed by the "giantism" of New York City and described it as a "frenetic commercial engine."²⁴ In these two prints he conveyed the city's multiplicity and incessant movement.

Certain of Davis' 1931 prints are easier to decipher than his two urban lithographs. The central figures in *Theatre on the Beach* and *Barber Shop Chord* perform against less confusing backgrounds. The unidentified theater, with its stately columns and handsome palladian windows, is placed upon a rocky Gloucester-like beach with little shacks and promontories of stone or sand. When studied alongside *New England Street*, one notes that *Barber Shop Chord* is a transposition of the scene of this gouache of a dockside street in Gloucester or a nearby seacoast town. The



Sixth Avenue El, 1931
Lithograph, 11 ⁷/₈ x 17 ³/₄ inches
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz 77.74



2 Figures and El, 1931
Lithograph, 11 x 15 inches
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Michael H. Irving (and purchase) 77.13

New England town provides a backdrop for the large, white-limbed protagonist. *Barber Shop Chord* has been drawn on the lithography plate with relatively small adjustments of emphasis, perspective and scale, the entire composition being reversed in the printing process. Though the message in the round street sign is "STOP" instead of "NO!" and one barber pole now floats in space, the only essential difference between these two architectonic and documentary views of the same New England street is *Barber Shop Chord*'s central figure. The prints that derived from Davis' summers in the country are calmer and more comprehensible.

In all of these lithographs, Davis expressed the reality of the landscape and the amorphousness or dislocation of the figure. In *Composition*, only a vague body-shape and a free-floating arm remain. In certain ways this print is the least interesting of the group. It lacks the scale, the greater aspiration and complexity of the other four 1931 lithographs. However, in its simplicity and its flat formal patchwork, *Composition* points most tellingly toward the future direction of Davis' art.



Theatre on the Beach, 1931
Lithograph, 11 x 15 inches
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz 77.75



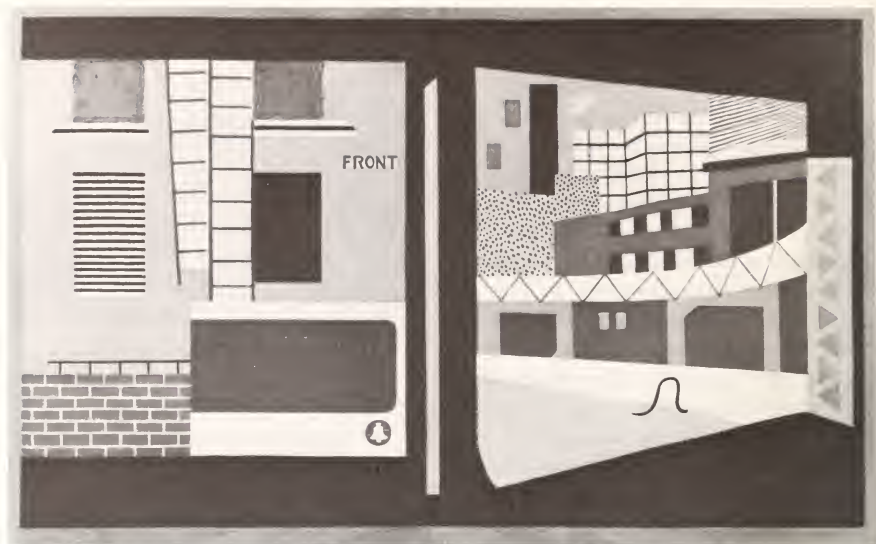
Composition, 1931
Lithograph, 9⁷/₈ x 9 inches
Promised gift of Mrs. Stuart Davis



Barber Shop Chord, 1931
Lithograph, 13⁷/₈ x 18³/₄ inches
Gift of Philip Morris Incorporated 77.84



New England Street, c. 1929
Gouache on paper, 8³/₄ x 11¹/₄ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.421



House and Street, 1931
 Oil on canvas, 26 x 42 1/2 inches
 Purchase 41.3



View of Front Street and Coenties Slip,
 Manhattan, c. 1930
 Photograph courtesy of the Museum of the
 City of New York

House and Street

“The American Scene” was the title of Davis’ March 1932 exhibition at the Downtown Gallery. *House and Street* was among the thirteen paintings of New York and Gloucester that were included. Though Regionalism was the momentous art movement of the day, the American Scene did not then have the meaning it does now. Davis and his dealer were comfortable assigning this title to the show, whereas a few years later its firm connections with Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood ruined the term for Davis, who viewed their versions of it as manifestations of Fascist thinking.

In *House and Street* Davis chose as one of his views of the American Scene Front Street in lower Manhattan, with a background of tenements and commercial skyscrapers. The painting’s rigidly defined geometry and unpopulated immaculateness sum up the earlier Precisionist aesthetic exemplified in the work of Charles Demuth, Louis Lozowick and Charles Sheeler.

A photograph of the intersection taken around 1930, relating to the right portion of *House and Street*, reveals how faithfully Davis had adhered to the reality of the site. His employment of such factual particularities not only resolved basic compositional problems but permitted greater freedom in applying color, perspective and varietal surface treatments. The word “SMITH,” larger than the street designation and the logo of the telephone company, is the most forcefully decipherable detail of the painting. It may refer to Alfred E. Smith, admired Populist governor of New York State and celebrated Democratic reformer, though Smith’s active political career had ended by 1931. The inclusion of his name here does not thus relate to a political poster, but is a partisan homage and, perhaps more important, a citation of the most representative of American family names. Later in the decade, political concerns were to

overshadow Davis’ artistic life. The possible allusion to Smith here reestablished within his art an ongoing commitment to liberal American political life which had begun with his drawings for *The Masses* in the early teens.

The most striking feature of *House and Street* is the division of the painting into two halves. There exists no prior example of this compositional device in Davis’ work. One writer has proposed as a source a painting by Henri Matisse, and another certain of Léger’s mid-1920s still lifes.²⁵ Given his great enthusiasm for the developing technology of television (the title of a 1931 gouache) and the cinema’s sequential images, these media constitute additional sources for the painting’s bifurcation. Almost completely framed in black, Davis’ paired images shift from a frontally observed, almost square, impenetrable facade on Front Street, to a receding vista, where the now-demolished Third Avenue Elevated turned northwest at the corner of Coenties Slip and Front Street. Thrust forward and outside the edge of the picture, the triangulated pier of the elevated and the white directional curve of its track lead the viewer back into a trapezoidal space. It is, as E. C. Goossen points out, “as if one had a view around a corner.”²⁶

House and Street is Davis’ ultimate adaptation of juxtaposition, and only succeeds by virtue of the most subtle and accomplished equilibrium of detail and mass. A similar format occurs in the gouache *Windshield Mirror* of 1932, and at least three later paintings: *Deuce* (1953), *Lesson #1* (1956) and *Pochade* (1958). The Museum’s 1931 painting is the basis of the entire underlying structure of *The Mellow Pad* (1945–51). In *House and Street* Davis selected from the American Scene the means to construct one of his most original and subsequently repeated compositions.

Owh! in San Paō

“The title of my painting is reasonable in the same way as the image itself. It has been scientifically established that the acoustics of Idealism give off the Humanistic Sounds of Snoring, whereas Reality always says ‘Ouch!’ Clearly then, when the Realism has San Pao as its locale, a proper regard for the protocol of alliteration changes it to ‘Owh!’”—Stuart Davis, 1952.²⁷ “‘Owh! in San Paō’ carries on the idea that a first class painting is an object. All feelings incident to its Subject and execu-

tion, along with the metaphysics of Method, disappear with the emergence of the Object. ‘Owh! in San Pao’ has the general character of a Still Life, seen in a blasting international mood. Instead of a Utensil we see an Event”—Stuart Davis, 1960.²⁸

In 1927, in his pivotal abstract still life *Percolator*, Davis made a coffeepot the subject of his picture. By the time he painted *Owh! in San Paō* twenty-four years later, his depiction of this utensil had been transformed into an



Owh! in San Paō, 1951
Oil on canvas, 52 1/4 x 41 3/4 inches
Purchase 52.2

Percolator, 1927
Oil on canvas,
36 x 29 inches
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New
York; Arthur H.
Hearn Fund



event. In 1951 Davis was selected to submit work to the first Bienal, São Paulo; it was the first time his art was ever requested for an exhibition outside the United States. *Owh! in San Paõ* had originally been chosen for this international artistic survey, but it was not one of the three paintings which ultimately represented Davis there in the fall. It had been titled *Motel*, but on August 31, 1951 (after, one may conjecture, the decision not to show this particular work in São Paulo) Davis changed the title to *Owh! in Sao Powh!*²⁹ Though he slightly altered the spelling and punctuation, Davis retained this title's exotic flavor and clipped Portuguese pronunciation as his designation for one of his most important paintings of the 1950s.

As is the case in numerous later paintings, *Owh! in San Paõ* borrows the structure of an earlier work. *Percolator* (or *Percolator of a Modern Design*, as it was originally known) was the first of the Eggbeater series, where Davis broke the bonds of direct representation; in turn, it related to a 1921 gouache. *Percolator* analyzes the components and structure of a coffeepot; its enigmatic "6" may possibly refer to a standard six-cup capacity. A point by point comparison of *Percolator* and *Owh! in San Paõ* reveals that their differences are of an additive nature. All of the compositional elements of *Percolator* have been retained. The lines have been thickened; one small addendum and an overlay of words complete the changes within the massed forms of the earlier painting. In *Owh! in San Paõ*, geometric shapes and words now float about the central, interlocked forms. A repeated dot motif, predating the use of enlarged Ben-Day dots in Pop Art, produces a background for one of the most demonstrative changes: the words "ELSE," "We used to be—NOW" and the artist's stylized script signature add an emphatic literary component.

Though the application of words was governed by the same acute and deliberate intelligence that directed all of Davis' creative

efforts, his intuition and poetic instinct render their meanings indistinct. Davis' explicatory prose further obscures the interpretative process: for example, in explaining his inclusion of "ELSE" in another painting, Davis stated that its content "consists of the thought that something else being possible there is an immediate sense of motion as an integrant of that thought."³⁰ In simpler terms, the word "ELSE" refers to an alternative, and *Owh! in San Paõ* is clearly an alternative version of *Percolator*. The phrase "We used to be—NOW" proposes a concept of time that would permit the present use of a past image. In conjunction with the work's title, this phrase fashions a nonsense poem whose two lines connect geography and time. Davis used letters and numbers in the same way he freely adopted aspects of reality—as coordinates for stylized observations. His prose, like his paintings, was infatuated with formal properties.

Davis left his most extensive verbal commentary for *Owh! in San Paõ*. In a further discussion of the painting, Davis wavers heroically between clarity and obfuscation, thereby providing the definitive deposition of his multi-leveled intentions: "My painting, *Owh! in San Paõ*, like my *Amazene* and *Rapt at Rappaport's*, are statements in a visual-proprioceptive idiom as simple as a Tabloid headline. Anyone with enough coordination to decipher a traffic beacon, granted they accept the premise of its function, can handle their communicative potential with ease. There are not mathematics of Abstract or Naturalist Expressionistic Idealism to befuddle here, and the Department of Philosophical Displacement Relativisms is on the floor below. Emotion and Feeling, that crucial Emulsion, is a dimension at right angle to the plane of the canvas in these paintings. They appropriately offer only a modest common-sense image of a familiar object in the Shape of Color-Space Logic."³¹



The Paris Bit, 1959

Oil on canvas, 46 x 60 inches

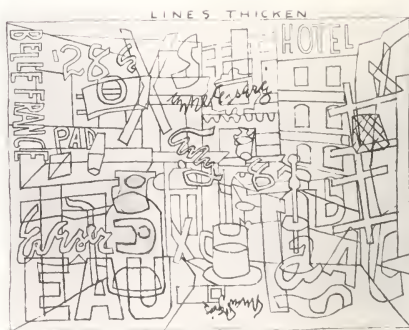
Gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of
American Art 59.38



Rue Lippe, 1928

Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 inches

Andrew Crispo Gallery, New York



Underdrawing for *The Paris Bit*, 1959

Photograph by Brenwasser Laboratories

The Paris Bit

By the end of the 1940s, Davis was an artist of great acclaim, but not a financial success. His only child, a son, was born in 1952. Davis had been awarded a Guggenheim Foundation grant around the same time. In fact, he and his wife often joked that their child was a Guggenheim baby. The grant gave them the first substantial block of money in their married life. In 1955, anticipating the space needed to complete his mural *Allée*, they moved to a larger apartment on the West Side with a studio. The following year Davis was elected to membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters. A retrospective exhibition was circulated to four major museums in 1957. The artist and writer Elaine de Kooning noted the effect of his art's calculation and intellect at a time when feelings and expressionism were triumphant: "Today, when hectic, automatic techniques so often and so surprisingly result in ingratiating, decorative and vaguely naturalistic imagery, a painting by Stuart Davis, with its plain, strong, 'ready-made' colors and sharply cutout shapes, has somewhat the effect of a good sock in the jaw, sudden, emphatic and not completely pleasant."³²

The 1950s witnessed the gleaming of Davis' achievement. Many of his greatest paintings date from these years. By the end of the decade, in his mid-sixties, Davis indulged in a bit of personal retrospection. *The Paris Bit*, based upon the 1928 painting *Rue Lippe*, is a pastiche of remembered Parisian architecture and street life. The model of the painting is a view of Parisian streets seen across a table laden with mineral water, a carafe of wine (which one notes is from La Cressonée, the restaurant in *Place Pasdeloup*) and a mug of beer. The serenity and amplitude of the scene become frenzied in *The Paris Bit*. The lines

have thickened to such a degree that, as the preparation drawing on the canvas reveals, the painting's character is essentially established without color. Caught amidst its boldly linear web, French words of his past like "EAU," "BELLE FRANCE," "HOTEL," letters which almost form "TABAC" and the "28" which dates his journey, join contemporary Americanisms like "Eraser," "X," "any," "unnecessary," "PAD," "LINES THICKEN," and the now-familiar script of Davis' objectified trademark signature. These English words, often drawn from the patois of jazz, are part of the syntax of Davis' aesthetic theory. The delimited palette of red, white, blue (the colors of both France and the United States), and black confers order on this most labyrinthine of his later works, unequalled in its complexity since paintings of the early 1940s. Davis had described Paris thirty years before in a statement which anticipates the intentions of this painting: "There was so much of the past, and of the immediate present, brought together on one plane, that nothing was left to be desired."³³

As John R. Lane has pointed out, the two seminal stylistic developments of Davis' later work, the influence of Mondrian and Gestalt theory, are manifest in *The Paris Bit*. Though Davis always resisted the seduction of the right angle, Mondrian's example reinforced the primacy of linear structure, and color as form. In *The Paris Bit* the passages of white, black and blue set up unified fields within *Rue Lippe*'s thickened infrastructure. Davis applied the intellectually current ideas of Gestalt to nullify the earlier work's discrete elements, standard perspective, and centered composition. He very consciously sought to unify the specificity of the Parisian street scene into the holistic cohesion that defines Gestalt.

Notes

1. Stuart Davis, Foreword to *Stuart Davis* (New York: American Artists Group, 1945), reprinted in *Stuart Davis: A Documentary Monograph*, ed. Diane Kelder (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1971), p. 19.
2. Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1966), pp. 223–24.
3. John R. Lane's research in *Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1978) has been a vital resource for this publication.
4. Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Walker and Company, 1969), p. 23.
5. Quoted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 28.
6. Stuart Davis, "Why an Artists' Congress?" delivered at the First American Artists' Congress, New York, 1936, printed in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 158.
7. For a discussion of Davis' murals, see Beth Urdang, *Stuart Davis: Murals*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Zabriskie Gallery, 1976).
8. Stuart Davis, letter to Alice Sharkey, July 14, 1941, in Artists' Files, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
9. Stuart Davis, "Recollections of the Whitney," radio broadcast on station WNYC, 1953, transcript in Artists' Files, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
10. Lane, *Stuart Davis*, p. 180, indicates incorrectly that Davis may have been born on September 7, 1892.
11. Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1939), p. 7.
12. Quoted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 21.
13. Ibid.
14. Rudi Blesh, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 11.
15. Barrel House was also the source of the well-known jazz composition "Barrel House Blues."
16. Quoted in James Johnson Sweeney, *Stuart Davis*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1945), p. 15.
17. Ibid.
18. Quoted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 25.
19. Stuart Davis, "A Painter of City Streets," *Shadowland*, 8 (August 1923), reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 173.
20. Quoted in Sweeney, *Stuart Davis*, p. 16.
21. Stuart Davis, "Self-Interview," *Creative Art*, 9 (September 1931), p. 211.
22. Davis, "Recollections of the Whitney."
23. Quoted in Sweeney, *Stuart Davis*, p. 19.
24. Ibid., p. 22.
25. H. H. Arnason, *Stuart Davis Memorial Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1965), p. 25, unconvincingly suggests Matisse's *Windshield*, 1917; E. C. Goossen, *Stuart Davis* (New York: George Braziller, Inc. 1959), pp. 25–26, suggests Léger's *The Mirror*, which is particularly relevant, and *The Compote*.
26. Goossen, *Stuart Davis*, p. 26.
27. Stuart Davis, statement in *Contemporary American Painting*, exhibition catalogue (Urbana: University of Illinois, College of Fine and Applied Arts, 1952), p. 184.
28. Stuart Davis, statement prepared for the National Blank Book Company, 1960; copy in Registrar's Files, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
29. I am grateful to Lewis Kachur, whose research of the Stuart Davis Papers (Fogg Art Museum) at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, yielded this information about *Ouh! in San Paõ*.
30. Stuart Davis, statement prepared for Alfred Barr, then Director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 3, 1952, printed in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 101.
31. Davis, in *Contemporary American Painting*, p. 184.
32. Elaine de Kooning, "Stuart Davis: True to Life," *Art News*, 56 (April 1957), p. 41.
33. Quoted in Sweeney, *Stuart Davis*, p. 19.

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- Sweeney, James Johnson. *Stuart Davis* (exhibition catalogue). New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1945.

Works in the Permanent Collection

Barrel House, Newark, 1913

Oil on canvas, 30¹/₄ x 37¹/₂ inches

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur G. Altschul

69.114

New Mexican Landscape, 1923

Oil on canvas, 22 x 32 inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.174

Early American Landscape, 1925

Oil on canvas, 19 x 22 inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.171

Eggbeater, Number 2, 1927

Oil on canvas, 29¹/₈ x 36 inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.169

Place des Vosges, 1928

Lithograph, 9¹/₁₆ x 13³/₁₆ inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.706

Place Pasdeloup, 1928

Oil on canvas, 36¹/₄ x 28³/₄ inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.170

Study: Compote, 1928

Ink on paper, 24¹/₄ x 18³/₈ inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.519

Study: Roses, 1928

Ink on paper, 24¹/₄ x 18³/₈ inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney

31.519a

Hôtel de France, 1929

Lithograph, 13⁷/₈ x 10⁷/₈ inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.705

Rue de l'Echaudée, 1929

Lithograph, 9¹/₁₆ x 14 inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.707

New England Street, c. 1929

Gouache on paper, 8³/₄ x 11¹/₄ inches

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.421

House and Street, 1931

Oil on canvas, 26 x 42¹/₂ inches

Purchase 41.3

Barber Shop Chord, 1931

Lithograph, 13⁷/₈ x 18³/₄ inches

Gift of Philip Morris Incorporated 77.84

Composition, 1931

Lithograph, 9⁷/₈ x 9 inches

Promised gift of Mrs. Stuart Davis

Sixth Avenue El, 1931

Lithograph, 11⁷/₈ x 17³/₄ inches

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz 77.74

Theatre on the Beach, 1931

Lithograph, 11 x 15 inches

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz 77.75

2 Figures and El, 1931

Lithograph, 11 x 15 inches

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Michael H. Irving (and purchase) 77.13

Owh! in San Paõ, 1951

Oil on canvas, 52¹/₄ x 41³/₄ inches

Purchase 52.2

The Paris Bit, 1959

Oil on canvas, 46 x 60 inches

Gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 59.38

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